

Resume the agriculture agreement talks

THE DEBATE EVERY-ONE IS RUNNING AWAY FROM

'This event is not going to turn into an agriculture agreement 2.0,' facilitator Simone Ritzer jokes at the kick-off for the Dilemma Dialogue of 11 March. But by the end of the event, the participants felt a 2.0 version of the agriculture agreement wasn't a bad idea at all – as long as it wasn't steered by the government. 'Can't WUR take on a role in it?'



Text Marieke Enter

For the Dilemma Dialogue in Omnia on 11 March, WUR invited a mixed group of roughly 140 stakeholders in the Dutch agricultural, food and nature sectors, from NGO staff to people from local government and individual farmers. The goal was to find new possibilities for the future in dialogue with one another and the team behind the now renowned Dilemmas document (entitled *WUR perspectives on agriculture, food and nature*). It seemed like the umpteenth initiative

in what has become a long series of meetings, dialogues, debates and the like. More talk, more consultations, and still nothing concrete. And there was some truth in that: this Monday afternoon in Omnia did not yield a solid solution to the deadlock, much to the disappointment of some. 'Honestly, I wonder. Here we are in the Mecca of agricultural knowledge; the dialogue on these issues has been going on for quite some time, and we still don't have any idea.'

Steering, but by whom?

There were some positive notes, though. 'I noticed we share a lot of viewpoints, even though we were a mixed bunch. The differences aren't so great at all. The reason we get stuck when it comes to

implementation has to do with a lack of leadership in my opinion.' All those present agreed that government leadership is sorely needed, but no one appeared to believe that the government would rise to the occasion. 'A strong government brave enough to take the lead and make clear decisions would be great, but I don't see that happening. So, what are we going to do: wait until the government finally steps up, or get on with it ourselves?' That discourse led to the suggestion that the researchers behind the Dilemma document should also focus on the crucial question of how you achieve the necessary changes. 'The governance aspect, so to speak. How can you ensure that changes are not only initiated but will also survive a few obstacles along the way?' That contribution resonated with people. 'It's tempting to make bold decisions, as it at least provides clarity – for a

Four points of view

To kick off the dialogue, four different organizations shared their views on the six dilemmas in the WUR report: the Association of Young Farmers (Agrarisch Jongeren Kontakt), the supermarket sector association CBL, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF-NL) and the Food Transition Coalition. The breakout sessions then focused on shared interests and underlying values.

‘HERE WE ARE IN THE MECCA OF AGRICULTURAL KNOWLEDGE, BUT WE STILL HAVE NO IDEA’

while,’ said one member of the audience. ‘But after that, you just get stranded in social processes again. So I would like to propose trying once again to draw up an agriculture agreement. The first round failed, but perhaps a second attempt would be successful.’ This suggestion was met with a lot of approving nods. ‘But with a lesson learned because in the previous talks on an agriculture agreement there were no rules. And without rules, you get nowhere. I call on Wageningen to give this some thought.’ This was not the only appeal made to WUR. ‘There is much talk of how disappointing it is that the discussions on the agriculture agreement were stopped. Why don’t we start again with a different, non-government instigator? Perhaps WUR could take the lead? There is a widespread sense of impatience.

Let’s start working with those who want to get something going, even if it is just at a local or regional level, if a national approach is not an option. We have been in this impasse for so long now; we want to get out of it!’

Leads

The event was closed by Ernst van den Ende, one of the initiators of the Dilemma document. ‘I heard a mixture of disappointment and impatience this afternoon, which I recognize. I, too, feel that WUR, as a knowledge institute, must address this debate that everyone seems to be running away from. We must feed it with the knowledge we have. Yes, it is still a search for answers, and decisions still have to be made. But I also see how WUR and the knowledge we have can contribute to these decisions being made. Many choices

and dilemmas are interlinked. We are trying to provide insight into that, for example through serious games or something resembling a voter’s guide. What happens when you play around with the variables? That can help you make the necessary decisions.’ ■

Dialogue rules

WUR organized the Dilemma Dialogue according to what are termed Chatham House Rules, meaning that the participants are free to communicate what was said but not by whom. These conditions also apply to *Resource*, which is why the statements in this article are not attributed, with the exception of Ritzer and Van den Ende.

